



# Diffusing Values or Adjusting Practices? A Review of Research on French Public Utilities

Gilles Jeannot

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**Diffusing Values or Adjusting Practices?**  
**A Review of Research on French Public Utilities**

Gilles Jeannot

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**Abstract**

*This article reviews a set of studies depicting how public officials (agents) in French public utilities have reacted, in practical terms, to customer-focused reforms. These reactions are differentiated in terms of the agent's position in the production cycle: maintenance of infrastructures; commercial positions; and service providing functions. These examples from the French experience are used in a more general methodological discussion. The representation of progressive diffusion of new public management values is contrasted with a representation of change that is triggered by the adjustment of workers' practices to new management rules.*

**Keywords:** *public utilities, identity, sociology of labour, work conditions.*

**Introduction**

The reintroduction of academic interest in such issues as motivation, norms and values and the identity of public agents in the context of new public management (NPM) must be understood in contrast to the model of public choice that underlies the trend since the 1980s of public management reform. NPM emerged in part from the criticisms of the dysfunctions of bureaucracies, which were based on a utilitarian representation of administration (Downs, 1967; Niskanen, 1971; Stretton and Orchard, 1994). Many reform mechanisms proposed basing public action reform on the same hypothesis of *homo economicus*, for example by

changing reward policies and introducing performance related pay. We argue that the reintroduction of dimensions of individual motivation, other than self-interest, has advantages for both knowledge and action. As regards knowledge, it allows many situations to be taken into account in which individuals' personal orientations (Perry, 1996), the institutions in which they participate (Powell and Di Maggio, 1991) or the type of psychological relations established with the organization (Rousseau, 1996) all play a part. As regards action, reforms based on a strict hypothesis of actors pursuing their own self interests, such as result-based salaries, do not always produce the expected effect of mobilizing individuals and may prove to be counterproductive by destroying neglected longstanding factors of motivation.

A range of research methods can be used in studying the effects and responses of public officials to the management reforms. Questionnaires offer one of the most immediate empirical ways to find out what drives individuals who work in public organizations in the new managerial context. Respondents are asked for their opinion on a number of general statements that attest to differentiated representations of their role or of the functioning of the administration. The questionnaire is designed to test the opposition to new and old models of administration. It is then possible to draw a graph of the supporters of one approach or the other at a given point in time. Opinion surveys can also be used to collect individuals' opinions on predefined questions thus serving to assess the respective weights of the old and the new set of principles and values among the employees of public organizations.

The questionnaire-based study allows for explanations of agents' orientations based on correlations established with independent variables. However, the scope of these explanations seems to be limited. The first reason for this limitation is the necessity to have independent variables which can be measured fairly easily but which do not enable us to fully grasp trends that will be discussed further. The second reason is the choice of variables and especially the preference given to variables related to elements outside the organization. For instance, the work of Perry (1997) on public service motivation assumes that motivation is related to external socialization (family, religion, professional networks, etc.).

In the absence of data other than the opinions gathered and correlations with factors of external socialization, many studies support an implicit cultural hypothesis of progressive diffusion of new values via individuals' conversion. This type of hypothesis is not devoid of practical consequences. It corresponds to a logic of reform that emphasizes the production of new ethics and identities, for instance via awareness campaigns, training, or the promotion of recruitment based on adherence to certain values.

This article introduces another form of data: detailed descriptions of employees' reactions to new situations at work. The underlying sociological hypothesis is pragmatic (Joas, 1992, 1993): it assumes that the real locus of change is in the agents' professional practice, and that it is when new conditions of production disrupt old habits that individuals change their practices and sometimes even their values and feelings of belonging to a group. In this perspective, change happens not through gradual adhesion to new principles but through the actual imposition of new working conditions. The new rules of the game imposed are first reinterpreted (Thomas and Znaniecki, 1920); that reinterpretation then triggers practical reactions and possibly a redefinition of identity. As strong as the imposition of a new managerial model may be, it leaves room for workers to adjust (Du Gay, 1996). Changes in representations, values or feelings of belonging to a collective are an outcome of the experience (Dubet, 1994) and of various (practical and cognitive) differences between old representations and new practices.

The data introduced here is drawn from a corpus of sociology of labour studies commissioned by French public utilities to evaluate the effects of reforms. A non-exhaustive thematic review was then presented. The qualitative research was undertaken by different teams, which did not necessarily share the same theoretical frame of reference. They did, nevertheless, offer the same attention to descriptions of the ways in which the agents have reacted to the new rules imposed by their managements. The method is based on direct observation by the researchers who accompanied workers, or on semi-structured interviews in which the workers were asked to describe their day-to-day work or the problems they encountered. The data collected thus comprised a number of accounts of the ways in which the new rules imposed on employees have been reinterpreted and the ensuing changes in practices.

The choice of public utilities rather than public administrations is justified for three reasons. The first is the large numbers of in-depth studies, which have been carried out on the transformation of work in these organizations and which, in some cases, offer an evolving picture over two decades. The second reason is the extent of the reforms that have been carried out and which make these public companies more comparable to public administrations in other European countries marked by NPM, than to French administrations which have, until recently, been less affected by this doctrine. Thirdly, the reason for the choice of public utilities is the existence of a longstanding model (Wieviorka and Trinh, 1989), which is strong and coherent and offers a sharp contrast to the changes observed. This model is linked to the historical nature of the networks (electricity, railways, post and

telecommunications) which involved technical integration at national level; universal access to the network with a standardized service provided; and a protected status for the officials/agents to guarantee a good functioning of the service. The advantages of technical-economic rationality, public service and protection of the agents of these organisations were mutually reinforcing and further strengthened by a framework of socialization and social support, which covered agents in their professional and private lives (family recruitment, sports clubs, trade union activities, etc.). This crystallized in a very strong feeling of belonging and personal identity with both the organisation and the group among all employees. Until recently the general population also recognised this identifying factor.

The reforms introduced over recent years have disrupted this coherent framework. Evidence suggests that the extent of their impact differs amongst employees depending on their functional position in the production cycle of the service. Differences in the impact of the reforms, appears to be especially linked to the organisation's level of engagement in competition. France Telecom has had the highest level of change in this respect and the National Railway Company the lowest, with Post and Electricity Companies in-between. However in all cases customers are the priority in the reform process. In the following sections we examine the response of back-office agents, sales agents, and agents in contact with customers for service delivery, to the changes.

### **The withdrawal of public officials (agents) working on infrastructure**

Agents in infrastructure maintenance (installing and repairing electrical or telephone lines or repairing railways) or those operating at the first level of production (sorting post, driving trains) were valorised the most during the period of reform and the setting-up of the new systems. They were also the most unionized and consequently, because of the power of the unions, the least directly affected by reforms. However, this stability was actually an illusion, because everything was changing around them, and this impacted on their own positions.

First, the reforms engaged, tended to isolate these agents, as the France Telecom case describes here. Isolation resulted from new salary policies and conditions in which salary scales were designed to make the positions in contact with the public and in sales more highly valued. The symbolic and financial de-valorisation of infrastructure functions triggered mobility towards service functions among those agents most receptive to the new values. Paradoxically, it also strengthened the position of those who defended the old model. Isolation was also produced by organizational choices. Reorganization and restructuring of services according to the type of market (domestic, small firms and self-employed workers, large

firms, administrations) was designed in such a way that technical jobs, directly associated with contact with the public, were attached to the commercial services of that particular market and no longer to a general technical division. Agents in charge of the construction of lines were thus cut off from all contact with the public (Jeannot et al., 1999). This isolation of the technical sector was further reinforced by the development of new software that allowed agents in contact with customers to perform technical acts on their computers without requesting a technician's intervention – for instance activating lines that had already been installed but had been cut off when the previous subscriber had moved (Hochereau, 2004).

Second, reforms generated competition between agents in the technical sector. Even though existing staff in the utilities in question obtained the status quo for themselves, they were unable to secure the same social advantages for new entrants. Private service contract agents or temporary workers were recruited to work alongside those with permanent tenures. Competition was also triggered by the possibility of sub-contracting and with the introduction of new technologies. The example of the centralized sorting services at the Post office illustrates these phenomena (Aubert and De Gaulejac, 1998). There, the introduction of two forms of competition between agents played an important role. The first was the recruitment of agents on temporary contracts at lower salaries than permanent employees to deal with peak periods. The second was the offer to agents to do paid over-time work and to attain a level of productivity three times higher than normal. These agents, seen as traitors, were called 'Califs' –or 'Californians' – to signify their submission to the American management model.

The consequences of this competition were multiple. The work collectives dissolved. Improved monitoring of the production curve eliminated slack periods, which had formerly enabled agents to interact and to bond within a collective. The high turnover of temporary workers no longer enabled them to learn from their seniors and, in general, competition intensified tensions and undermined the collective dimension of work. Also work itself was less valued, due to the role played by the 'Califs' who accepted an intensified pace of work and the temporary workers (paid by the hour or upon completing a given task) who accepted lower rates. The image of postal workers with permanent jobs was increasingly negative: they were perceived either to be overpaid for what they did or not to work enough. In any case as professionals they were devalued. The possibility of machines doing their work strengthened that feeling. Finally, these conditions eroded the tradition of trade union solidarity and also general morale.

Currently, agents with permanent positions have been able to preserve the same working conditions and are still able to defend their due rights, but they find themselves in a defensive position. Whereas in the former model their advantages were considered as a form of compensation for an essential function in the utility, today, temporary workers regard them as privileges. Moreover, the employees who enjoy such rights no longer train temporary workers. Their position leads to conflicts and the production centres are consequently at the centre of some of the major industrial disputes and strikes.

### **Turnover of sales staff**

A study carried out in the mid-1980s (Alter, 1989) reported how nascent sales services in telecommunications, at the Post and Telecommunications (PTT) Administration, were still under the domination of the infrastructure services. The commercial model was hardly recognized and the majority of agents in contact with the public did not wish to be paid on the basis of their results. At the time, engagement in the commercial sector was an adventure chosen by a few 'pioneers'. Since then these functions have become the most valued ones, both symbolically and practically. Reform (for the Postal and Telephone sectors) has translated into new salary scales to the advantage of sales staff, and into direct commissions on sales. These new rules of the game triggered a process of selection of agents within the organisation. Those who were most receptive to commercial values took advantage of the symbolically and financially favourable conditions offered.

Some technicians became advisers who dealt with customers by phone or over the counter. The most motivated counter clerks became financial advisers in the competitive banking section at the post office. In these new positions they tended to acknowledge the relevance of the organisation's new values. They compared themselves with private contract agents, recruited with good conditions and no cultural reference to the public service. The feeling of 'specificity' of the service disappeared and mobility to the private sector became both possible and realistic. From the perspective of an approach centred on the diffusion of new principles of commercial action, as opposed to former egalitarian principles, one could say that there was a gradual imposition of the new model.

A study of post office managers (De la Burgade, 2004), undertaken after an earlier study (Alter, 1989) shows that after short-lived hesitation those who were offered commissions on the sale of new commercial products (decorated and pre-stamped envelopes) tended to agree to play the game. There is no certainty, however, that this acceptance of the new doctrine will result in the construction of a new identity that is as sound as the previous

one. In fact this cultural change has put the agents engaged in commercial activity in an unstable position, as the example of financial advisers at the post office shows (Zarifian and De Coninck, 2001; Piotet et al., 1998). These agents are submissive and accept the stress generated by strong pressure to meet sales targets. Often they have to compete to obtain the positions in which objectives are easiest to attain. Many of them used to be counter clerks and are snubbed by their former colleagues who consider their new sales functions as a necessary evil, at best, and who judge those who choose to become financial advisers as traitors. In exchange for these sources of tension the financial compensation is limited. A clear sign of the absence of a stable identity model is the high turnover rate in these services: some agents revert to counter clerk functions while others move on to the private banking sector.

### **The *bricolages* of front-line workers**

The agents who have been studied most are those in charge of direct service delivery to users. They again have been affected by reforms that are both symbolic and practical. From a symbolic point of view, the term 'customer' has been imposed on them, whereas they traditionally referred to those receiving the service as 'users'. From a practical point of view, new management systems have allowed greater differentiation of customers, and productivity or performance indicators have been introduced.

The research on front-line workers is old enough to allow some historical trends to be identified. The first studies in the late 1980s showed the inconsistencies between management systems devised in the 1970s for uniform treatment of users, and management plans under the new system to differentiate the treatment of customers. Armand Hatchuel (1991) noted that with a system of uniform treatment in Parisian metro stations, combined with egalitarian management of employees, the best way to ensure there was an agent who spoke English in every station used by tourists was to teach all employees English. That is now rejected as wasteful and unnecessary.

The pioneering work of Joseph (1988), inspired by Goffman, examined the way in which agents in contact with the public tried to fit singular situations into the new normative management frameworks. The background debate was then defined in terms of reconciliation between an egalitarian reference model, embedded both in the management tool and in agents' representations, and the expectations of adjustment to the service, which he qualified in terms – inspired by Musil – as a problem of 'the quality of a service without quality' (Joseph and Jeannot, 1995; Alter, 1989).



This tension between the egalitarian principle and the wish to differentiate clients has been clearly visible in the discontent of agents in charge of control functions. Drivers on public transport have to cope with numerous difficult situations daily as they are faced with users who try to justify commuting without a ticket (Darteville, 1992; Joseph, 1988; Yvon, 2004). Surveys show that the new commercial doctrine has put agents in a vulnerable position. Whereas their function is basically controlling, their management has asked them to find a way of not contradicting the company's stated wish to treat the customers as sovereign. At the same time, customers themselves readily employ the company's commercial doctrine to argue their case. Several studies on council housing, a field marginally different from public utilities, report similar cases where caretakers have to use different types of argument to ensure a minimum of order necessary for maintaining the premises (Warin, 1993; Eymard, *et al.* 1994).

The terms of the debate are slightly different today. First, significant technological and management changes have been made so that service delivery can more effectively be adjusted to users. In most cases it is not one but several tools that are used and which do not necessarily converge, as seen in the private sector (De Coninck, 2005). Second, the growth of direct or indirect competition has led to the introduction of performance indicators that in many cases make it possible to opt for the solution with the lowest costs.

Studies since 2000 highlight tensions between different ways of targeting the end user. The problem may be a difference between the agent's perception of what the user expects, and the perception enshrined in the management tool. It may also stem from the difference between several tools for rationalizing production. Many PhD theses, based on ethnographic observations, describe agents' attempts to match their understanding of what the users expect with the prescribed behaviour found in quality guides, which have a different representation of clients/customers.

Often agents find themselves in contact with customers who express an expectation greater than the one provided for in the service offer. For instance, the position of France Telecom agents whose job is to install Internet connections is particularly difficult (Asnal, 2004). Customers believe that the Internet service offer means being able to access the Web when they switch on their computer, whereas the service actually consists of providing access to a line that works. The installer is given the task of installing the line and checking that it works; it is then up to users, equipped with a connection kit, to configure their computers. Yet, faced with the helplessness of certain customers who are unable to log on, installers are tempted to exceed the mission entrusted to them and to help the customer. The problem is that

the time allocated to them does not allow for this, and neither are they specifically trained for this type of service.

Tension of this nature, between profitability objectives and users' expectations, is at its height in all situations of contact with poor or socially excluded sections of the population. In its banking function the post office is obliged to accept all accounts and especially those of beneficiaries of the Minimum Income Allowance. Dealing with this type of person is difficult, generates peak periods on the days that the allowance is paid, triggers numerous banking operations with an overall low financial volume (since beneficiaries draw small amounts from their accounts) and often require greater attention since these clients have difficulty in expressing themselves and/or in understanding the organisation's rules. After timing these operations, Gadrey *et al* (1997) estimated an excess cost of 10 per cent due to these specific users. In so far as these costs are not taken into account in productivity indicators, the agents are caught between users' expectations and the attainment of productivity objectives. Researchers' interpretations differ. Some, following the work of Lipsky (1980), highlight agents' protective mechanisms (Jeantet, 2003); others report situations in which the agents side with such users out of compassion (Borzeix, 1995; Klinger, 1990; Jeannot, 1996).

Sometimes contradictory expectations of quality enter into conflict. This can be illustrated by the work of Deroche (2004) on urban buses and tramways. The improvement of the effective speed of buses and trams is a key concern of the transport company studied, since it is both a quality factor for users and a cost reduction factor (the same bus does more trips for the same price if it travels faster). To improve speed, the regulation centre can ask a driver to accelerate his or her manoeuvres at the station or to deviate partially from the usual route. This helps improve the flow and overall quality but it can run counter to a user's expectations. The user who is physically challenged needs more time to board or alight and cannot run for the bus; others expect buses to stop at all collection points and not to rush by. The driver has to choose between sticking to the commercially advantageous speed or adjusting to these particular expectations and situations.

In these situations agents often find singular solutions by resorting to *bricolage*. This is on the one hand symbolic. The term 'customer', which is supposed to attest to a new approach, is re-appropriated by those who have been with the firm longest: 'the public service means serving the customer well'. On the other hand it is also practical. They have to make decisions in situations by finding a compromise between quality, adjustment, and aid to the most disadvantaged on the one hand, and the productivity constraints weighing on them, on the other. A counter clerk can always take a little more time to deal with the request of an old

person, but this type of trade-off is characterized by tension (taking the time for a particular person means making those in the queue wait) or difficulties of definition (is the agent making a 'commercial gesture' or providing a public service?). The agents' options are not necessarily the same and can be the subject of debate within organizations. Neither the organizations that refuse to take into account the irreducible nature of these dilemmas by denying them or simply decreeing new rules, nor the workers collectives or unions that are often too loosely structured, are enough to support the agents in question. They often face these dilemmas alone.

## **Conclusion**

The research reported here is not all focused on the issue of identity. Even if global tendencies do tend to converge on the way in which problems are defined and on the first level of reaction to such changes, this body of separate studies does not allow us to infer a unified conception of the mechanisms of identity formation. Yet these observations on the practical modalities of adjustment at least enable us to comment on the questions which are raised in this special issue and which prompt us to examine certain implicit reasoning linked to opinion polls. This can lead us to critically question certain assumptions of these studies but also to complete and enhance the interpretations produced.

The given examples here raise questions about the limits of opinion polls as a research tool. We can imagine what a questionnaire survey might have produced in the case of French public companies: on the one hand, signs of resistance to change by senior agents in charge of infrastructure, with unanimous adherence to traditional egalitarian principles; on the other, gradual adherence by the agents of commercial services to new market values. But would this picture reveal that the modalities of agents' socialization in production centres are not perpetuated? Would they show that sales agents' adherence to the new model does not actually put them in a comfortable and stable position? The interpretation is likely to be difficult in the case of agents in charge of service delivery. How would an agent, endorsing the official 'customer' discourse but in practice defying the rules imposed by management in treating the needy, respond? And how should that response be interpreted?

The collection of experiences also complicates the causal schema of an evolution of values and identity triggered by the imposition of a NPM ideology. The prism of practices reveals evolving interests and values and changes that are not only ideological. As Friedberg (1998) notes, the wish to react to the dominant current of public choice can sometimes lead to an over reaction and to neglect the fact that individuals also act in self-interest. The

articulation between values and interests is a complex matter. Do individuals act against their immediate interest in order to comply with principles dear to them, or do they adopt values that cover the actions they pursue in their own interest? The diversity of reactions reported here shows that it is difficult to find a single explanation. Moreover, field studies undertaken without a strong hypothesis on the fundamental factor of change help to reveal factors other than those of a new managerial doctrine. The appearance of new technical-managerial software, which allows a redistribution of the division of work between the front office and the back office, is not in itself a consequence of a new commercial model, yet it strongly affects the evolution of practices and associated representations.

In many respects these qualitative analyses of actual practices are nevertheless less contradictory than complementary. They enable us to further our understanding of the findings of quantitative surveys on representations. This applies, for instance, to the emergent issue of hybrid identities. In their study of the evolution of identities in a NPM context in Austria, Meyer and Hammershmid (2006) note a correlation of this hybrid form with the government level suggesting that the hybrid identity is more likely to be found at the local level and less likely at the state or district level. This can be related to differentiation based on position in the organization, which emerges from the qualitative surveys presented here. And as we have seen, the position of the agents in charge of service delivery is the most likely to reveal individuals' complex positioning. Moreover, surveys on practices also provide insight into the hybrid forms, which appear in this study and in various other contributions to this special issue. These hybrid forms are perhaps less the sign of a search for an intellectual compromise between former and new values, than the expression of practical compromises between various solutions. Boltanski (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991) has developed an original observation tool to describe how people justify their acts in day-to-day conversations. One of its essential assets is to show empirically that the same people, faced with different problems within a very short interval, are capable of arguing on the basis of either an egalitarian or a more commercial logic or, more often, of inventing mixed arguments that can apply only to singular situations.

Finally, these studies prompt us to question the coherence of the ideological and practical dimensions of the NPM model. In the former administrative model the values produced were consistent with salary systems and the agents' experiences. The model also took into consideration strong mechanisms of socialization and training of new employees, which perpetuated the system. The new model seems to intrinsically offer as many factors of tension as of federation. It is normal for a new model to generate zones of conflict with the

previous model, but in many cases the tensions revealed in these field observations stem from the new model itself. First, the orientations proposed generate practical dilemmas valorising the quality of customer services but also imposing cost indicators which result in customer expectations not being met; and valorising those who have a private-sector outlook, with the risk of seeing them leave the organization. Second, by turning competition between agents into a factor of mobilization and change, this model fails to facilitate the emergence of a group capable of 'framing' individuals. The strength of the former model was that it contained, in daily working life, the means for its perpetuation by a collective framing, whereas the new model is far from proposing comparable modalities of socialization. From the point of view of the interpretation of contemporary trends, this raises the question of whether the existence of complex and hybrid forms highlighted by most of the articles in this issue is a transitory phenomenon related to the resistance of advocates of the former model, or a lasting one related to the absence of practical coherence in agents' lived experience. From a practical point of view this encourages us to envisage the production of new collective spaces of socialization rather than new ethical codes to stabilize the situation.

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